

Viewed from near Satri village, the twin peaks of Nanda Devi (just left of centre) form part of a spectacular Himalayan panorama that nudges the India-Tibet frontier. The mountain is considered to be a sort of patron saint of the Kumaon region

THROUGH THE FOOTHILLS ON FOOT

In the shadow of Nanda Devi, a new initiative is coaxing visitors into an overwhelmingly rural environment and giving them a flavour of hill life, while at the same time helping to halt the depopulation of local villages. **Amar Grover** takes a stroll through the foothills of the Indian Himalaya and discovers a lost world of pine forests and hemp fields

At Unapige, Amar Grover



Left: sorting hemp plants in Risal village. Hemp has been grown in northern India since at least the eighth century; Right: a villager sweeps up hemp seeds in the flagstone courtyard of a Kathdhara house. The seeds are widely used in winter cooking for their 'warming' effects



“Here, look!” My guide, Raju, points urgently at the ground. There on the trail amid the shade and fallen leaves of a deodar tree lies a neat little pile of rounded, brown-black droppings. Pale mouldy-looking threads seem to encase them. “Calcium,” Raju announces. “From bones... probably ate a small deer.”

Above us, there's a small cave formed by a large boulder balanced on the thickly forested hillside. Raju's companion Hem crawls inside, his torch picking out pugmarks in the soft damp soil. “Leopard,” he announces,

beaming cheerfully. We prick our ears and carefully peer around us before resuming our journey to the next village, a few kilometres away.

This is Kumaon – the eastern part of northern India's Uttarakhand state, which rises on the edge of the Gangetic plain and soars to the frontiers of Tibet and Nepal – and not for the first nor, undoubtedly, the last time, it feels as though I've strayed into the footnotes of a Jim Corbett tale. His classic *Man-Eaters of Kumaon*, although mostly about tigers, is perhaps the only reason that Kumaon might be a familiar name today.

However, I wasn't here to track big cats, but to investigate a new rural-tourism project centred on Binsar, one of the loftiest hills among the many that ripple north from Naini Tal to the massive ramparts of 7,816-metre Nanda Devi.

Village Ways is hoping that its take on tourism – visitors walking the Himalayan foothills from village to village and staying in modest guesthouses – will help maintain local ways and traditions by breathing much-needed economic life into a profoundly rural region that is slowly being depopulated.

A cautious yes

The basic idea behind Village Ways is far from unique; India is currently riding a wave of rural-tourism initiatives, from one-man home-stays to larger corporate projects. “What marks out this one,” explains Graham Edgeley, a rural-development expert with many years of experience in India, “is in it fully involving a community as a team.” The aim is to foster livelihood development through commercial tourism.

“Our starting point was the villages themselves,” says Himanshu Pande, the inspiration behind Village Ways and

proprietor of the Khali Estate's Mountain Resort, a charming Raj-era bungalow at Binsar that has evolved into a low-key hill retreat. With the help of Edgeley and Keith Virgo, another rural-development specialist, together with the tourism expertise of Richard Hearn (something of a pioneer of British walking holidays with Inn Travel), the project took shape. “We first asked villagers what they felt about the possibility of having tourists,” continues Pande, “and their reply was a cautious, ‘Yes’.”

Their caution, I found, could in part be explained by their location. The

Forestry Department owns vast tracts of Kumaon, and Village Ways' five core villages lie within the department's 20-year-old Binsar Sanctuary, which encompasses most of Binsar Hill. Originally a Raj creation, it would seem that for many Kumaonis the sanctuary has – rightly or wrongly – become the bane of their lives. Restrictions on grass-cutting, grazing and the use of wood (fallen or otherwise) and even oak-leaf fodder, as well as on the tapping of pine resin have sometimes led to tension and protests. Half-hearted Forestry Department plans in the

ISLAND IN THE STREAM

The oft-repeated claim that India's Majuli Island is the world's largest riverine island may not be true, but with its unique monasteries and fascinating tribal cultures, the island is a beguiling destination none the less. It's just a shame it's shrinking, says **Amar Grover**

It's dusk, and our long, heavily laden boat slides out into an inky river capped by a fading ochre sky. Among its passengers are villagers, shopkeepers and a handful of mendicants, their bicycles and the odd scooter. I alone have a car; parked sideways, there is barely enough space for it: its bumpers practically overhang the gunwales.

As night falls, our pilots navigate by the glimmer of a faint moon – as well as their experience and intuition. It's a short voyage, just 90 minutes, but here in upper Assam, few treat the Brahmaputra River lightly.

I'm heading for Majuli Island, wrongly billed in numerous guidebooks and in much of the Indian media as the world's largest riverine island. Whatever its ranking in this geographical niche – and the Indian government is probably the most accurate in describing Majuli and its wetlands, sandbanks, countless braids and adjoining tributaries as the world's largest mid-river delta system – the

island is shrinking at an alarming rate. Erosion is now threatening the long-term viability of its 150,000 or so agrarian inhabitants and the fabric of a distinctive monastic heritage that was established here during the 16th century.

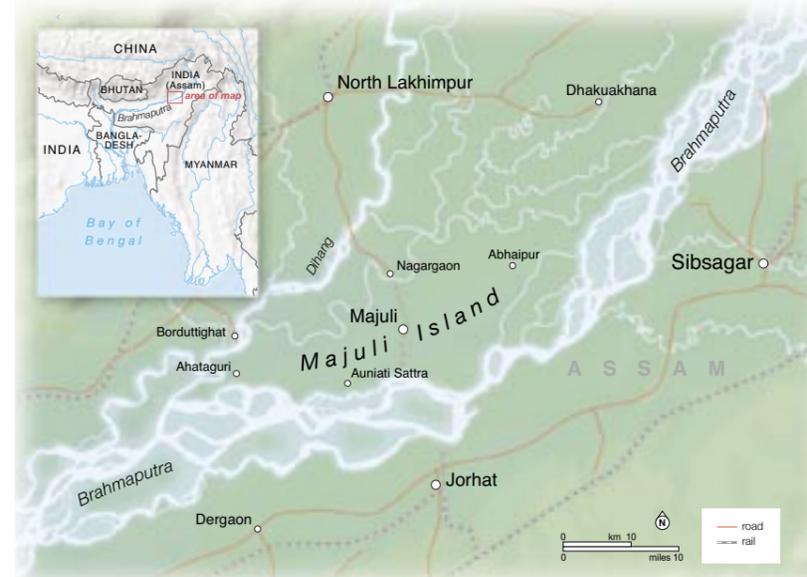
Eroding away

Majuli lies amid a cluster of tributaries and channels that feed two arms of the Brahmaputra. It's long and flat, lushly beautiful in parts, sandy and bleak in others. Once covering an estimated 1,200 square kilometres, recent satellite images indicate that its area has fallen to between 577 and 875 square kilometres (depending mainly on whether or not its more substantial sandbars are included).

Each year, several square kilometres of the island simply disappear. According to Dr Probhat Kotoky, a scientist based at Jorhat's Regional

Research Laboratory, only about 88 kilometres of earthen flood embankments now exist around the island, just over half of what was first planned during the mid-1960s. And while erosion has almost certainly always been a feature of the island, because only a relatively small part of Majuli is suitable for cultivation, its impact is being felt more and more.

Many experts blame Assam's huge earthquake (8.6 on the Richter scale) of 1950, when landslides deposited vast amounts of extra sediment into the Brahmaputra, after which the already capricious river changed course – “abnormally”, in the words of one report. Others attribute its shoaling (which leads to channel widening and thereby erosion) in



Opposite, above: passengers await boats at dusk at Nematighat, one of the main ferry stations that links the southern arm of the Brahmaputra with Majuli's southern shore; Opposite, below: a Mishing woman winnows rice outside a traditional storage hut; Right: a young monk at Uttar Kamalabari *sattra*. Many of Majuli's monks bear strikingly feminine features



part to the construction of flood embankments and deforestation elsewhere in the region.

Whatever the cause, the Brahmaputra has long been a dynamic, mercurial river. It's continually forging new channels, adopting the former courses of tributaries and, in Bangladesh, it even veered to join the River Jamuna. It remains unpredictable, and for the Assamese during the summer monsoon, its floods are a bringer of both life and death.

For Majulians, however, the great river remains the only way in. We reach the island's southern ferry station – some wood planks pulled across a crudely bevelled shoreline – in darkness. Only later did I see the two-metre-high sandy cliffs that delineate much of the island and make it so erosion prone.

At night, Majuli is a dark place with few lights and frequent power cuts. By day, it's sleepy and bucolic; birds teem

around its lakes and paddies, little skiffs ply the waterways and bicycles rule its pot-holed roads. Superficially idyllic, it seems just the place where monasteries ought to flourish and tribal people live undisturbed.

And indeed, Majuli's monasteries, or *sattras*, are known across India. They were initiated by Sankardeva, the celebrated 16th-century Assamese sage, scholar and writer, who developed a simpler and less ritualistic creed centred on the god Vishnu and his avatar Krishna. A prodigious writer, he created dance-dramas depicting mythological stories and the inevitable triumph of good over evil. His particular Vaishnavite culture has endured, and its classical dance is once again becoming one of India's most prominent. Locally, lay villagers and monks still perform together during festivals, especially during autumn's three-day Ras Purnima, which celebrates the life of Krishna.

I was shown around Uttar Kamalabari *sattra* by Dulal Saikia, one of its white-robed *bhakats*, or disciples. Worship takes place in a typically simple and unadorned *namghar*, or meeting hall, set within a quadrangle enclosed by living quarters. While Kamalabari has no central idol, some of the others do.

Essentially, there are four different monastic sects on the island, with varying customs and restrictions; Dulal, for example, can't eat food prepared outside his *sattra* without undertaking a compensatory fast. The sects own varying amounts of land both on Majuli and (as many locals rather quaintly say) on the 'mainland', and are funded solely by donations and endowments.

The division between *sattra* and village is sometimes blurred. *Namghars*, for instance, often serve as community meeting places where local issues are discussed and resolved. Sects that allow marriage have monasteries that resemble villages, with women and children, so the boundary between faith and farming becomes permeable.

In Majuli's heyday, it played host to around 65 *sattras*, but now just 22 remain. This reduction is, in part, attributable to what could be described as natural decay, as well as Majuli's creeping modernisation. In Bengenaati *sattra*, a senior monk told me that the "old tranquillity and calm" were being lost, his view no doubt coloured by recent thefts from the *sattra*'s tiny museum. My guide on the island was surprised by the recent appearance ➔

Majuli misses the boat

In 2004, the Indian government applied to UNESCO for Majuli to be listed as a World Heritage site. However, in July, UNESCO's Heritage Committee referred the application back to India (a far from uncommon procedure for any applicant country) for more preparatory work.

Some reports in the Indian media squarely blamed delays by the Assam state government in passing legislation for Majuli's protection and management. Central government lobbying of UNESCO, too, it's claimed, was ineffective.

Scrutiny of the committee's decision indicates several other reasons, among them a need for more information on various aspects of Majuli's *sattras*, its people and their farming practices, as well as development of a management plan to include a cultural-tourism strategy. It also urged an appraisal of Majuli's river basin "to ascertain the chances of the island surviving in the medium term".